

Sunday 4

When we look at today's Gospel, we see that there is a great deal of emphasis on authority or power. The people in Capernaum are astonished at Jesus' preaching because he, unlike the scribes, speaks with such authority. And Jesus' authority is not just a matter of speaking but also of acting. He cures the man possessed by an unclean spirit. Thus even the unclean spirits are subject to his power.

Speaking with authority is no stranger to us even today. When we go to a doctor or take our car to a garage and the doctor and the mechanic tell us that we should do this or that, we listen to them because we presuppose that they know what they are talking about. We presume the doctor knows how to handle our sickness; we presume the car mechanic can fix our car. Therefore, like the Lord, they can speak to us with authority.

It might be good if this were the only kind of authority in the world, one based on knowledge, because this kind of authority is normally used for our benefit. Furthermore, it cannot claim to be absolute, for the knowledge on which it is based is limited.

Another doctor or car mechanic may see things differently and

may provide us with better results. It is also a kind of authority which can be tested and can then be accepted or rejected depending on whether or not it produces good results. That is what we see in this Gospel today. The unclean spirit obeys Jesus. Therefore, for those who witnessed this fact the authority of Jesus' word was clear. It produced results. Finally, this kind of authority is good because it respects our freedom. It appeals to us but it does not force us. Yes, Jesus' word forced the evil spirit out, but it did not force the people who saw this to accept his authoritative word. It simply appealed to them to do so and offered them evidence for doing so.

But there has always been another kind of authority operating in the world, one which is not based on expertise or knowledge and does not present itself to us as an appeal to our freedom. Let's call this other kind of authority brute power or coercion. Have you ever visited a prison? If you have you might have felt this kind of authority. Those in charge there can force prisoners to do what they want. There are no questions asked. There are no options offered. You must obey. This is brute power which denies any equality between the one giving the orders and the one obeying.

Between the authority which appeals to our freedom and brute power which ignores it there is another kind of authority which seems to split the difference between these two. For example, look at the kind of authority which the economy exercises on us. It determines where we live, what we eat, whether or not we can go to school, whether or not we have work, whether or not we can travel, whether or not our parish can continue in existence. Indeed, it seems much closer to being brute power than the authority which appeals to our freedom. And that is true of so much of our lives. Our freedom is severely restricted by all sorts of authorities, and all we can do is respond to them. But how we choose to respond to all these limiting authorities cannot be taken away from us, and it is this which makes us who we are and want to be.

But the situation is different with respect to the authority which appeals to our freedom, which asks us to accept it on the basis of its persuasive power and results. Here we are dealing with ideas, with art, with entertainment, with all the things which make up our lives as free agents. Here it is up to us to accept or reject these realities as authorities in our lives. Which ones should we accept, which ones should we reject, and on the basis of what norms? For us who call ourselves Christians the answer is clear. Jesus and his way of thinking and living are the criteria we use in responding to

these authorities. Our bishop, Thomas Tobin, provided us with an example of this way of acting this past year when he said that his reason for rejecting the immigration raids practiced by the government this past year in different parts of the country in which mothers and fathers were torn away from their children was a very simple one: Jesus would not have acted in that way.

Today's Gospel is a good reminder to us of the simple fact that the authority in our lives is Jesus. Not the government, not the television, not the economy, not the entertainment industry, not our own comfort or profit. No, Jesus alone is our authority. We live from the power of his word as it works itself out in our daily lives.